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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN JOURNALISM REMAINS A DANGEROUS PROFESSION

REF: A) YEREVAN 661 B) YEREVAN 933

This cable is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Two recent incidents, although they are unrelated, highlight the fact that journalists in Armenia are subject to intimidation. Journalist Edik Baghdasaryan reported receiving e-mail threats following the publication of an article on his web site about oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan's new political party, Prosperous Armenia. A journalist working for opposition paper Chorrord Ishkhanutiun (Fourth Estate) who reported derogatory allegations about a local official claimed he was attacked in mid-July by a gang including the official's brother.

JOURNALIST SLAMS OLIGARCH, TWICE

¶2. (U) Baghdasaryan, who heads up the Association of Investigative Journalists NGO, published two stories on his Hetq.am investigative journalism web site about the new political party, Prosperous Armenia (ref A), run by business tycoon and parliamentarian Gagik Tsarukyan. The first article, which ran June 26, characterized Prosperous Armenia's financial activity as being "in the shadows," and accused its employees of not paying taxes. "No laws exist for Gagik Tsarukyan. ... One thing Armenian oligarchs know for sure is that money determines the law," the article concluded. The article was reprinted several days later in the Haykakan Zhamanak tabloid paper.

¶3. (SBU) The second article, published July 3, alleged that Tsarukyan paid the state trifling sums, or nothing at all,

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for land on which he erected several large apartment buildings. The article also accused him of building illegally, without the appropriate government permissions. (Note: Baghdasaryan is one of Armenia's few independent investigative journalists. His reporting is held in high esteem by many members of the international community, and he has received assistance from INL as well as from other governments. His integrity was called into question, however, when he made some unsubstantiated allegations in a high-profile series alleging corruption in the Prosecutor's office. End Note.)

LETTER-WRITER THREATENS TO "SLAUGHTER" OLIGARCH'S DETRACTORS

¶4. (SBU) Baghadasaryan passed us copies of six obscenity-laden e-mails. The first, dated July 6, used an extremely vulgar Armenian obscenity to describe what would happen to Baghadasaryan if he wrote anything more about Tsarukyan. Baghadasaryan answered the letter, offering to meet the author. The remaining e-mails warned, "Sooner or later the good guys will wipe you out," and "I will slaughter anyone who touches Tsarukyan."

¶5. (SBU) Baghadasaryan said his investigation had traced the e-mails to Irvine, Calif. He said he had reported the incident to the National Security Service (NSS), and that NSS employees had visited his office to begin their investigation. Yerevan Press Club President Boris Navasardyan told us that, despite the NSS's initial response, it will not investigate unless it receives strong pressure to do so. Navasardyan said that, while he didn't think the threats came from Tsarukyan, they were probably from someone on his "team," or who was dependent upon him.

CHORRORD ISHKHANUTIUN JOURNALIST BEATEN, OFFICE SET ABLAZE

¶6. (U) Chorrord Ishkhanutiun journalist Gagik Shamshian claimed a gang of men attacked him July 11, hours after a local radio station aired an interview with him in which he accused the local district prefect's father of threatening him. Shamshian had reported that two men arrested on charges of bank robbery were related to the prefect. Shamshian told newspapers that the prefect's brother was one of his attackers.

¶7. (U) Newspapers reported that, on July 19, someone broke the windows of the Chorrord Ishkhanutiun office, poured

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gasoline on the windowsills, and set them on fire. The fire did not enter the building, but there was some damage. Newspapers reported that Chorrord Ishkhanutiun, disillusioned with Armenian law enforcement, had not asked for an investigation. The reports pointed out, however, that the incident had been publicized and that, by law, the investigators could launch an inquiry themselves. Chorrord Ishkhanutiun editor Mher Khalechyan said he wasn't sure why the fire had been set. Other journalists drew a connection between the incident and Shamshian's reporting on the district prefect. (Note: Chorrord Ishkhanutiun is owned by the opposition Armenian National Movement Party, and is known for harshly criticizing government authorities and other public figures. We are not familiar with Shamshian's work. End Note.)

JOURNALISTS RESPOND

¶8. (U) A group of newspaper editors and NGO heads released a statement expressing concern about these incidents and the arrest of Yerevan Zhamanak Editor Arman Babajanyan (ref B). The statement expressed concern that, "as the parliamentary elections draw nearer in Armenia, there is intensification of pressure and threats to media representatives from the forces and individuals that have a reason to fear criticism and disclosure of some of their activity." The statement drew a connection between the incidents and the run-up to the parliamentary elections in 2007, and called on authorities to fully investigate the incidents.

¶9. (SBU) Yerevan Press Club President Boris Navasardyan told us that, although his organization plans to work to ensure a free press during the elections, he doesn't have faith the government will allow that freedom without strong pressure from "someone." He said he was troubled by Defense Minister Serzh Sargsian's recent comments that no one is infringing on

journalists' rights. (Note: Sarsgian said at a press conference July 14 that criminals exist and people are threatened and beaten all the time, and that journalists should not expect to be immune from crime. At the end of the statement, he acknowledged that the incidents should be "condemned by police." End Note.)

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) These incidents are troubling, but we do not believe they involve high-level government interference. The most important thing the Armenian government could do to address the situation would be to actively investigate the cases and punish those responsible. Unfortunately, given the prosecutor's apathetic history, that seems unlikely. We will keep a close watch on future allegations of media intimidation.
EVANS